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PHIL502.01: Diversity, Relativity, Objectivity

Bridget Clarke

University of Montana - Missoula, bridget.clarke@umontana.edu

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Philosophy 502: Diversity, Relativity, Objectivity

For let us guard ourselves better from now on ... against the dangerous old conceptual fabrication that posited a 'pure, will-less, painless, timeless subject of knowledge'; let us guard ourselves against the tentacles of such contradictory concepts as 'pure reason,' 'absolute spirituality,' 'knowledge in itself': here it is always demanded that we think an eye that cannot possibly be thought, an eye that must not have any direction, in which the active and interpretive forces through which seeing first becomes seeing-something are to be shut off, are to be absent; thus, what is demanded here is always an absurdity and non-concept of an eye. There is *only* a perspectival seeing, *only* a perspectival 'knowing'; and *the more* affects we allow to speak about a matter, *the more* eyes, different eyes, we know how to bring to bear on one and the same matter, that much more complete will our 'concept' of this matter, our 'objectivity' be (Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, Third Treatise, §12).

Human beings acquire morality the same way we acquire language: through immersion in a human culture. (Thus one way to cast doubt upon someone's scruples is to ask if they were "raised by wolves.") In this and in other important respects, morality is (like language, like the arts) culturally embedded; it is bound up with wider ways of seeing and doing things that distinguish one culture (or sub-culture) from another. It evolves in and through specific 'forms of life.' What are the implications of this for moral agency? In particular, how should the cultural embeddedness of morality affect our aspirations for moral objectivity? After all, cultures *vary* in their understandings of morality as do the individuals who belong to them; this is often referred to as the fact of 'moral diversity.' How deep does this diversity go? How should it affect our *conception* of moral objectivity if we decide it still makes sense to have one? What does it say about our ability to understand others or ourselves when our culture is under threat? What is required if one is to have reasonable *conviction* or *confidence* in one's moral beliefs? (Might the answer to this itself be relative to a time, a place, or an individual?) What is at stake in whether one has such confidence?

This seminar will be devoted to this large, difficult and extremely important family of questions. At the end of the day, I hope to have a clearer sense for how to give moral diversity its due while holding onto a conception of moral objectivity that has some bite—or to see why I should hope for something else.

Requirements

- Regular attendance: I will ask you to drop the course if you are unable to attend regularly.
- 1 1-page response paper each week 40%
- 2 15-minute presentations 20%
- 1 final paper 40%

Response papers and presentations will be graded on a simple A,B,C,D scale (no pluses or minuses)

A: <i>Alligator</i>	Exceptional. Standing ovation.
B: <i>Bassinet</i>	Good work. No complaints.
C: <i>Crumbs</i>	Something important is missing.
D: <i>Doghouse</i>	Something is terribly wrong.

Response papers are due by the time we meet to discuss the material to which you are responding. As a rule, I will not accept late response papers nor will I accept them for days in which you were not in attendance.

The key to good response papers, good presentations and good class discussion is not to have figured everything out (whatever that means) but to grapple in a serious and deep way with the readings. This takes careful and skillful reading as well as self-awareness: you need to identify what about the piece moves you in some way, strikes you as worth further thought, and you need to articulate this so that we can all follow along.

What we're after is *good conversation* with the texts we're reading and with one another *about* the texts we're reading. Think about what goes into good conversations (a lot!).

Response papers and presentations can take any form you like (questions, linked or disparate comments, working a theme) but your remarks need to be *specific*, always including page numbers indicating the relevant passages, and they need to be in language that is as clear and plainspoken as you can make it.

For your first presentation, you will work jointly with one or two other members of class to develop and present a set of questions or comments on the selected reading(s). You will also serve as point person in the discussion for that day. For your second presentation, you may develop and present jointly with one or two others members of class or you can present something on your own.

Final papers will be graded on the normal scale (pluses and minuses). We'll discuss these further in due course.

Readings

Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope*. Available from the UM Bookstore.
Coursepacket. Available from the UC Copy Center.

Tentative Schedule

Week One

9/1: Introduction

9/3: Lear, *Radical Hope* [RH], ch. 1

Week Two

9/8: RH, ch. 2

9/10: RH, ch. 3

Week Three

9/15: Slote, "Is Virtue Possible?"; Bolstieri, *Born in the Delta* excerpts ("The Delta"; "Violence")

9/17: Nussbaum, "Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach"; Comment by Hurley

Week Four

9/22: Walzer, "Objectivity and Social Meaning"; Comment by Putnam

9/24: Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme"

Week Five

9/29: Winch, "Understanding a Primitive Society"

10/1: Foot, "Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives"; Mackie, *Inventing Ethics*, 1.5-1.8

Week Six

10/6: Harman, "Moral Relativism Defended," *focus on §§1-2*; *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity*, 1.2-1.5

10/8: Williams, "The Truth in Relativism"; "Relativism and Reflection" (from *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* [ELP])

Week Seven

10/13: Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* [CSI], ch. 1; ch. 3, pp. 44-52

10/15: CSI, ch. 4; Hare, "Nothing Matters"

Week Eight

10/20: CSI, ch. 9; Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?"

10/22: McDowell, "Towards Rehabilitating Objectivity"; Reply by Rorty

Week Nine

10/27: Williams, "Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline"

(Recommended: Williams, "Knowledge, Science, Convergence," *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, ch. 8.)

10/29: Foot, "Moral Relativism"; Foot, "Does Moral Subjectivism Rest on a Mistake?"

Week Ten

11/3: Winch, "Nature and Convention"

11/5: Gallie, "Essentially Contested Concepts"

Week Eleven

11/10: **Workshop final paper topics**

11/12: Diamond, "Moral Distances and Differences: Some Questions"

Week Twelve

11/17: Clarke, "Virtue and Disagreement"; Graham, "Tolerance, Pluralism and Relativism"

11/19: Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* [CR], ch. IX

Week Thirteen

11/24: TBA

11/26: Thanksgiving ☺

No response papers due this week

Week Fourteen

12/1: CR, X; Stevenson, "Ethical Disagreement"

12/3: CR, XI pp. 292-299 and 303-312; Cohen, "The Lord Justice Hath Ruled: Pringles are Potato Chips"

Week Fifteen

12/8: TBA

12/10: **Workshop Final Papers**

No response papers due this week

Week Sixteen

12/18 **Final papers due** in my mailbox "Clarke" (LA 101) by noon.